

Advance Praise for L.E.A.P.

“Life as a young adolescent is fraught with a daily gauntlet of socioemotional events while searching for genuine identities that fit! In *L. E. A. P.*, Bellon captures the emotions that run on a loop through 14-year-old Linn’s mind as she navigates friends, her brother, dad, and her mercurial mom who’s fighting her own demons in a never-ending war. Bellon’s dry humor with lines such as, “The Fourth of July always has sales, and I need some new genes” will keep you LYAO; but Linn’s reality digs deeply into your soul as you cheer for her to find solace in a seemingly impossible journey toward adulthood. You’ll laugh and cry as Bellon’s story telling places you directly into the uncertainty of adolescence—that feeling of being frozen in time between the joys of ignorant childhood and the promise of ever-elusive adult-like opportunities—“juvenescence” as Bellon labels it.”

Dave F. Brown, EdD., young adolescent researcher and author of *Young Adolescents and the Middle Schools They Need*.

“Funny and tragic, poignant and powerful, Bellon draws on personal experience to weave the tale of a mother-daughter relationship strained to the point of breaking by mom’s alcoholism. But search beneath those tumultuous waves to find perhaps the real story: an inspiring and realistic depiction of sibling survival against the odds.”

Chris Negron, acclaimed author of *Underdog City*, *The Last Super Chef*, and *Dan Unmasked*

“Thirteen-year-old Linn is a liar, and, in her family, this is an asset. Everyone lies to keep the ‘perfect family’ illusion intact. But only two people think the illusion is working and they are Linn’s parents. Changing would

require acknowledging that Linn's mother is an alcoholic and neither of her parents is ready for that. Linn and her brother Brendan do what is required to survive in an unpredictable and unsupportive home. Above all else, they must pretend to be perfect, even as their problems worsen.

L.E.A.P.: Linn's Emerging Adult Plan by Toni Bellon is an honest view into the life of a teen living with an alcoholic parent and the systemic dysfunction that happens in a family that tries to pretend everything is normal. Readers will love Linn and her insightful, pragmatic nature. Bellon is a masterful storyteller and Linn's journey toward adulthood is entertaining, heartbreaking, and hopeful."

Kim Ottesen, Programming Manager, Forsyth County Public Library

LEAP.

LINN'S
GROWING
EMERGING
ADULT
~~LIST~~
PLAN

by
Toni Bellon



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Content Warning: This book contains descriptions of alcoholism, verbal and psychological abuse, and physical abuse that may be disturbing to some readers.

To all of my children, birthed or chosen, and grandchildren. You're safe and loved.

Dedicated to Sonja Kozuch, the definition of a great friend.

Acknowledgements

This book would not exist if it weren't for my brother, Joe, and all the guilt I've felt about his life situation. Sorry, Bro. I did the best I could.

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Within this story, I found areas I needed more information about. Then I reached out to Michael Wilkerson for help with teen communication. My educational consultants were Lorie and Dusty Skorich. You all gave great advice; any mistakes are totally mine.

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Most importantly, I'd like to thank my husband, John Jupin, who has read about and lived with every word and character in Linn's world. Just maybe he's represented poorly in things I've written. Sorry, not sorry!

Toni Bellon

JOURNAL ENTRY -
SURVIVING MOTHER'S DAY

I got through Mother's Day this year without having anything thrown at me—objects or words. What do you say when everyone thinks your mother's a caring kindergarten teacher? You don't—you keep your mouth shut and pretend she's perfect. I'll be fourteen in four months. Brendan's older, but not by much. He thinks our family values are about keeping secrets. So, I lie and hide the truth from my friends and myself. My truth? I'd change the old poem—when she's good, she's okay, but when she drinks, she's a monster.

Linn

Walker

Gurke

Chapter 1

Teening Up

SITTING ON MY BED, I review my new journal entry. Is this what Grandma Rose wanted when she sent the notebook for my birthday last year? Her letter said I should find “positive truths in my life.” Grandma wrote about starting every day thinking positive thoughts. Like, being lucky to be alive and having enough space to live in. Her letter explained that she’d been wanting a cow and the positives worked when a farmer friend gave her one. She named the cow ‘Jed’ so she wouldn’t miss Grandpa after he’d passed. I’m not sure that was a truth. I mean, she got the cow, true. It’s also true that my grandfather died three years ago. But, I’m pretty sure Grandpa Jed didn’t want a cow named after him.

I’m just not sure wanting a cow is a positive. I heard that ‘Jed the cow’ didn’t stay long. After Grandpa Jed died, Grandma moved to a smaller house. She kept ‘Jed the cow’ in her backyard and her neighborhood didn’t allow people to have fences. The HOA didn’t say anything about keeping cows. I doubt they imagined a person might want livestock. Jed became a problem with other residents and Grandma had to give the cow back to the farmer. Still, I try to follow her lead.

At first, I used the notebook she sent as a diary.

L.E.A.P

Dear Diary,

Today I started rereading Johnny Tremain. I read it five times in fourth grade and wanted to see if I still think it's good. It starts by describing animals. But what fourth grader reads a book that has the word 'cock' on the first page—twice? I must have been completely bonkers.

Dear Diary,

Why do I listen to boy singers? Because I listen to my older brother's music? I need to add girls to my playlist. But I don't like gooey love songs. Mom and Dad like 90s stuff—and opera. WTF? I need to find my style. Check out—angry girls and anthem songs.

Dear Diary,

Golden Boy talked to me today. Okay, he only said hello, but he looked at me. Nadine was there so I couldn't pee my pants without her noticing. Totally acted like it was no big deal.

In a few months, I'll be fourteen and in high school. High school means growing up and leaving childish things behind, like my diary entries. I've got to be more serious. Calling it a journal instead of a diary is more mature. Everything I wrote in my diary was true, but I don't think it's what Grandma meant. She wants me to write about *the truths in my life*.

Okay, I left the word *positive* out. Sorry, Grandma Rose, I know you want me to focus on what's good in my life, but

you also want honesty. I'm not allowed to be honest about Mom. If I could tell Grandma the truth about Mom's drinking, she might understand why I lie. I mean, she should know her child's pulling the Bruce Banner to Hulk switch.

I put my *journal* away when I hear the doorbell. That'll be Nadine. Even though she's my best friend—only friend—I don't want anyone to read about my truth. I've never told Nadine about Mom's big secret. And she hasn't seen what happens when Mom drinks. Let her believe Mom's a sweet kindergarten teacher. Isn't it better to protect Nadine from a mean drunk who isn't her problem?

"Thanks for coming," I say as soon as the door is open.

Nadine glances around. "Where's your parents? Don't they get today off too?"

"No. It's a teacher training day." I imagine Mom grabbing her tumbler and pouring a drink when she gets home. "Boring, with a capital B."

"So, it's only us?" Nadine asks.

"Nope. Brendan's here."

"Did I hear my name?" Brendan says as he enters the family room. "You girls talking about me? I know it's difficult to be in the same house with this awesomeness and control yourself." Brendan runs his hands up and down his sides.

I roll my eyes. "We're going to my room, and you're not invited." I turn and walk toward the garage. Nadine gives Brendan a finger wave.

My bedroom's the smallest one in the house. All the others are on the opposite side of the family room. My room is next to the laundry area and guest bathroom. Except when my parents pass my door on their way to or from the garage, I'm away from everyone else. I love the privacy.

Nadine sits on my bed, and I pull out my desk chair. Not a lot of choices here. My room has a twin bed, a desk,

and a lilac beanbag chair. If it weren't for the beanbag, this room would disappear in a haze of bland. The last time we painted, Dad must've found a sale on beige.

"I need some help," I admit.

"Help?" Nadine laughs. "Linn's asking for help? Do you feel sick?" She becomes more serious when I laugh at her joke. "What do you need?"

My face turns red. "I need help buying bras."

"Glad to hear you're ready. I thought it was such a big deal when I started wearing a bra two years ago in sixth grade." Nadine grins. "Mom called them training bras."

"What did she think you're training them to do? Swim? Is that how you win all those races?" I give Nadine an exaggerated up and down look. "Are you still wearing your mom's *training* bra?"

"Funny, Linn, very funny." Nadine laughs. "This year I bought some racer-back mesh bras. They keep things in place and the colors match my underwear, in case."

"In case of what?" I ask.

"High school boys. I'm planning to 'show and tell' my pretty bra and matching undies. I'll walk up to the first guy I meet and ask if he likes lacey things." Nadine sticks her barely noticeable boobs out and laughs.

"Like that'll happen!" I snort and we both giggle. "Would your mom say I need a *training* bra? Could I teach mine to do math?"

"Linn, you need a full-on bra. Hasn't your mom suggested going shopping?"

"I asked her. She freaked out, announced the topic didn't exist, and left the room." I shake my head. "Mom's father was a religious nut. He blamed women for everything that's wrong with the world. You know, the whole Adam-and-Eve-apple-means-sex thing? So, the minute I started... growing... changing, Mom had problems with me."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Nadine says quietly. "What can I do to help?"

I'm too aware of my full-length mirror staring at me. "Help me buy bras? I don't know what I'm doing."

"We can go to Mercado Plaza. I've done this with my mother, lots. I can run sizes and types for you." Nadine beams. "I'll be your personal shopper."

"I'm not sure." I peek at the mirror. "I don't think I should be seen in public. I know I've been growing, but I've become someone I don't know and I don't like anything I see. Especially the zit taking over my chin." *Note to self—get rid of mirror.* "I can see my old self hiding in this bigger body. This year I've added two shoe sizes and five inches. All still ugly."

"No, Linn." Nadine stands and walks in front of me. "Your hair has cool blond and brown streaks. Those freckles are cute, and your eyes change color depending on what you wear. Did you see the way Steve was checking you out in gym class? I did."

"Steve looks at every girl," I point out.

Nadine wrinkles her forehead. "Steve doesn't pay attention to me and I'm a girl."

"Then he's stupid. You're way prettier than I am."

"Who's prettier than who?" Brendan asks as he walks into my room.

"Brendan," I sigh. "Get out!"

"Chill, Lil Sislet. I only popped in to check my hair." Brendan leans in front of me to see his reflection in the mirror. He strokes a strand of perfectly placed hair. Brendan loves everything he sees. How am I related to this guy?

"You two aren't doing anything private." Brendan squints at Nadine. "Right, Nad-D?"

"That's right, Bunny Buns." Nadine gives Brendan a fake smile. "Nothing to see here. Simply two girls planning a juvenescence shopping trip. You can hop along now."

“Juvie-scents?” Brendan questions. “What’s that?”

“It means growing up.” Nadine arches one eyebrow at Brendan. “You know, the time when you’re changing from a child into an adult. My parents use big words all the time to increase my vocabulary. Don’t yours?”

“Nope.” Brendan ignores Nadine’s sarcasm and lowers himself into my beanbag chair. “We speak English here. While you’re doing your juvie shopping, get Spaz here some battle armor.” Brendan nods his head toward me.

“Juvie? Battle armor?” I ask.

“You know.” Brendan shrugs. “You need a shortstop to protect second base.”

Nadine rolls her eyes. “Brendan, you’re totally cringe-worthy.” She turns to me. “He’s saying you need a bra.”

“What? How do you... Who said... Have you been... I can’t even.” I cover my face.

“Chillax Bubbles.” Brendan looks back and forth between Nadine and me. “You two will be in high school soon. I can’t have my idiot little sister shaking *the goods* across campus. I have a reputation to maintain. You’ve got to get those *things* under control. You know Mom isn’t going to help. Might as well get your sidekick to do it.”

“What do you know about any of this?” I ask.

“Do you listen to anything I say?” Brendan slumps a little lower in my beanbag. “I was at your last meet. Those team swimsuits are thin. You need to double suit like fly-girl there.” He nods to Nadine. “And, that was the longest, most boring race I’ve ever seen. I mean, after three laps I lost interest.” Brendan pauses. “When you climbed out of the water, you had no secrets.”

I hate it when Brendan has a point. So, I refuse to agree. The last thing I need is Brendan feeling superior. I know there must be something wrong with me, but I act

like I don't care.

Brendan stands, blows on his fingernails, and buffs them on his shirt. "I'm so good-looking, I put you both to shame. Now, get this done before the new school year. My work here's finished. Ta-ta, girls." With a wave, Brendan is gone.

I close my door.

"Your face is way red," Nadine says.

"My brother was talking about seeing through my swimsuit. Wouldn't you be embarrassed?" *Who else was at the swim meet? Was Golden Boy there? I bet he doesn't even know I'm a swimmer.*

Nadine frowns. "When Dad deploys, it's only girls at home. There isn't much to be embarrassed about."

"Sorry, I forgot about your dad being gone."

Nadine shakes her head. "Let's get back to bra shopping. Hand me your phone."

"What are you going to do?" I hand it over tentatively.

"I'm going to take 'Before and After' pictures so you can see the difference. Now, strike a pose so we can compare it to the after photo."

I put my hands on my hips, one foot forward, and stare at the ceiling. "Do I look smart?"

Nadine imitates a photographer snapping pictures. "Brilliant, darling. Simply dazzling."

There's a movement on the driveway in front of my bedroom window. I glance outside. My parental warning system isn't working today. Did the garage door open? No, that's Talia's car, Mom's co-worker. Did she drop Mom off at the front door? How long ago? Is Mom already in the house? The muscle under my left eye begins to twitch. I know crazy's about to happen. The twitch says, "Pay attention, be ready, and don't drop your guard."

"Nadine, stop." I reach for my phone, but it's too late.

My door opens and Mom steps in. "What are you two

doing? Why's the door closed?"

"Nothing. We're planning a shopping trip," I explain from behind Nadine.

"No." Mom steps up to Nadine. "You're taking pictures of her. Are you sexting?"

"No, ma'am," Nadine responds. "We're pretending to model for a photographer."

"Give me that." Mom pulls my phone out of Nadine's hand and glances at the screen. She moves past Nadine and holds the phone out to me. "How do you unlock this?"

Nadine must have pressed the side button. "Mom, this is crazy. We weren't sexting. That makes no sense."

"You think I'm crazy?" Mom squints. "Am I crazy to pay for this phone? You're lucky to have a phone. *You* should show more respect."

Mom's voice carries her alcohol-heavy breath to my nose. When or where did she drink? Can Nadine smell the liquor too?

"Mom, I don't think you're crazy, only the situation."

I nod toward the door and attempt to telepathically send the words, "Get out, save yourself." It works and Nadine slips out of the room.

"I'm going to keep this." Mom shakes my phone at me. "When your father gets home, I'll show him your filthy pictures. Let's see what happens then. Do you think your father wants to pay the bills for a daughter who's a slut? You could end up homeless on the streets."

"Mom, I'll show you the pictures. They're not filthy." I reach for the phone.

"No, no, no. You're a liar *and* a slut."

I stare at her and will my mouth to stay shut. In my mind, I scream... *A mother shouldn't say that! You can't make me cry.*

She breaks eye contact first, turns, and marches out of the room.

I check for Nadine and am relieved she's gone. Looking in the mirror, my face is red hot. The tears don't show but I feel them wanting to fall. I speak to the reflective surface, "If I don't want to see myself naked, I'm definitely not sexting. I'm not a slut. But I do talk to myself. Does that mean I'm crazy?" Mom's at least... unstable... and I don't want to be like her.

Without my phone, I can't check in with Nadine. E-mail? Mom's probably guarding our one-and-only computer. I tiptoe out of my room and peek into the kitchen. Mom's pouring bourbon into her tumbler. She holds the bottle up to the light, turns to the sink, and adds some water. Ahh, so Dad's marking the bourbon bottle. Who's the liar now?

Mom moves into the living room and sits in front of the television. She clicks on the news, takes a drink, and places the tumbler on the computer desk.

I return to my room and fall onto my bed, my head flopping between the bed and the wall. On the floor is the heating vent and within the dusty grate I see the outline of a small metal ball—a steely. It brings back a sharp memory, back to age ten when I first knew Mom didn't like me. I've always known I wasn't perfect enough for her but that was the same day I realized I couldn't tell anyone about... my big mamma lie.

It was the end of fourth grade, and I didn't have any friends, except Nadine Thomas. She was the only person who accepted me for who I was. Nadine didn't make fun of my short haircut or say I was more boy than girl. It was nice to have one person on my side, but I didn't really pay attention to what others said about me. I was too busy making enemies by beating everyone at marbles. Other kids played Pokémon cards or other games, but my parents wouldn't spend money on "frivolous" toys. The marbles had been a present from PaPa Gurke, and I had

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convinced other kids at school to get their own. Each day I would come home with my winnings—their marbles—and watch Sara Jay on the weather channel. Sara obsessed over weather words, and she was always happy. Bad weather made her even happier. The science nerd in me wanted to be her friend.

The day I stopped playing marbles, our electricity was out. I couldn't watch television. I tried to imagine the weather idioms Sara Jay might use to describe my situation.

"Storm's a-brewing. This is a big one, California. The rain has been falling for days, and you know when it rains, it pours. Hundreds of homes are without power. Mudslides have closed all major tunnels around the Bay Area. So, batten down the hatches."

"Why are you such an annoying brat?" my mother said as she walked into the family room, the ever-present glass of brown liquid in hand.

I switched the channel in my head and considered how I might report the situation. *Stay where you are and avoid Linn's house, because this is a shit storm.* In my imaginary weather studio, there was a large map marking my location with a poop emoji.

The pressure in our house had been building for days. Lightning was striking all around us. The air carried the smell of blown transformers and musty dirt under the doors. With every bolt of lightning, Mom's irrationality grew.

"Why isn't your father home? That district meeting isn't important enough to waste his weekend," Mom asked no one in particular for the third time.

Reporter Linn would have said, *Three sheets to the wind.*

Brendan attempted a reasonable answer, "Maybe there's another mudslide. The tunnels are always blocked

when it rains this much.”

I stayed silent. I recognized the signs, and I knew talking wouldn't work.

“He's never here when the electricity goes out,” Mom slurred. “Why do I have to be stuck here with two shitty kids?”

I sent a silent plea to my brother—*Don't answer. Please don't answer.*

“We didn't cause the weather, Mom. You're being ridiculous.” Brendan was missing or ignoring my psychic messages.

Mom attempted to focus her bleary eyes on us. “Wait until your father gets home. Then you'll be sorry.”

Now, how many times had I heard that drunken threat?

I wanted to add, “Come hell or high water.” For once I kept the words to myself.

“How's he going to find us in the dark?” Crap, those words had slipped out. My mouth was operating without permission from my brain.

“You think your father won't paddle you both? I'll make sure of it.” Mom's voice had reached the screech level. The house didn't seem large enough for her. She was pacing around the room. Not finding anything useful, Mom grabbed a plastic coaster from the side table and threw it at the wall. Brendan and I ran into my bedroom before she could find something heavier. We should have gotten under the bed, but we made the mistake of jumping on top. Mom was right behind us in full cyclone mode. Fueled by her drunken rage, she looked around for a weapon and grabbed my bag of marbles. She opened the pouch and began to throw them at us.

Despite the lack of electricity, I saw every marble flying toward us as if in slow motion. A handful of glass marbles arced through the air. They reflected the lightning right before they hit our skin. The clear cat's eyes would

have been invisible if it weren't for the flash of color in the middle that gave them their name. *This isn't bad*, I told myself. *A few marbles aren't going break anyt— Oh crap, I forgot about the large boulders, they hurt.* A boulder hit my forehead and I realized Brendan had been smarter. He had situated himself next to the wall with me as a bumper. *Thanks, Bro.*

The steelies looked like tiny ghosts. Their gray color cloaked their path, but I knew when one hit the arm I was using to defend my face. Those suckers hurt like the ball bearings they were. I tried to track and dodge the projectiles. My cheek burned when it took a major blow. I recognized the heft of my prize steel boulder. *Why do I own anything so heavy?* I wondered. *That's it; I will never play marbles again.*

Brendan and I covered our faces with our hands and tried to scoot lower on the bed. We knew better than to cry out, though I couldn't keep the tears from streaming down my face.

Mom finally reached the bottom of my marble bag. "Clean up this mess." She threw the leather sack and left the room. It landed on the bed, reminding us how limp our defense against Mom had been.

Brendan and I crawled around in the dark looking for my scattered marbles.

"Geez, how many marbles do you have?" Brendan hissed.

"Two hundred thirty-two regular marbles and ten boulders, approximately."

"Why can't you be a normal girl and play with soft things?"

"I won't get any more marbles, I promise. I'm switching to baseball cards tomorrow."

We found about half of the marbles. Some of the smaller steelies had rolled into the heating vents in the

floor. We couldn't reach those. The others were probably hiding in the corner with my pile of clothes. I decided to pick those up when the electricity came back on.

After about thirty minutes of pretending to clean, I heard the front door open. I held my breath until Mom greeted Dad sweetly, "George, how was your day? Did the electrical outage cause you any problems on your drive home?"

Beware, Dad, she's been drinking. It's not safe in this house.

I am amazed at Mom's ability to change personalities when Dad walks through the door. I imagined she must be thinking, *Look at me. I'm so helpful. I haven't been blaming you all day for the storm, the electricity, or the act of pro-creation. I'm a sweet little wife awaiting my chance to help you during your time of need.*

That was absolutely gag-worthy.

"A mudslide blocked the Caldecott Tunnel. I had to drive around the San Pablo Reservoir. Water was rushing down the canyons and onto the streets. I hydroplaned twice and barely stayed on the road."

I could hear the exhaustion in Dad's voice.

"How about you? I hope there wasn't anything worse than the power being out here?"

"Everything's fine, just perfect. With the electricity out, I can't cook much but I can make you a sandwich. Sit down and I'll take care of everything." Mom's voice was dripping with kindness. She didn't sound normal. And there was no sandwich for Brendan or me.

I blurted out my follow-up weather report. "The cleanup has taken days. Thousands were without power and the roads blocked. The state emergency coalition had every worker on twenty-four-hour shifts. But the real hero was Bella. Amid the largest shit storm this century, she made a sandwich and fluffed a pillow. I'm personally

blown away.”

“Don’t be such a spaz,” Brendan said as he listened at the door.

Dad lit candles and placed them on the table. The soft flickering glow convinced Brendan and me to enter the living room. We judged each step as if the ground might shift at any minute. I was glad Dad couldn’t see the welts on my face and arms.

“What were you two doing during the storm?” he asked us.

“Not much.” Brendan snuck a peek at Mom.

Even without seeing her face, I knew Mom didn’t care about Brendan and me. She was only focused on Dad and his opinion of her. Of course, Brendan and I were not supposed to tell Dad what had happened. If we did, she would make us suffer more than marble welts. So, when Dad turned to me, I told my big mamma lie, “Everything’s fine, just perfect.” I used Mom’s words to define the truth.

Yes, I lied but I also knew that I had changed. My mother was not going to take marbles away from me. I was in control of what I would do and who I would be. I told Dad everything was fine but what I meant was: I will be fine.

* * *

Dad studies me over the leftovers Mom warmed up and put on the table. “Your mother tells me there was a problem today.”

Pushing mushy pasta around my plate has not stopped this moment from coming. Most people who meet my father describe him as intimidating, but he’s a marshmallow compared to my mom. *Be careful, Linn. Don’t answer too honestly with Mom sitting right here.*

“No problem. Nadine and I were planning a shopping trip. She took a picture of me and Mom misunderstood.”

“Look at the pictures,” Mom snaps. “Your daughter’s

a slut.”

Brendan spews his water back into his glass. “Slut? Linn?”

“Brendan,” Dad’s voice is low, “this discussion is for Linn. Stay out of it.”

“Yes, sir.” Brendan coughs the word, “fa-uck.”

Dad puts the phone on the table. “Unlock it and show me the pictures.”

“Dad, I wasn’t sexting. Don’t you trust me?” I hand the unlocked phone back to him. He scrolls through the pictures and looks at Mom.

“Bella,” he asks Mom, “do you want to see these for yourself?”

“So she can liar?” Mom slurs.

Liar? How much bourbon has she drunk?

Dad studies Mom and I can see him make up his mind. Siding with her is more important than the truth. “I’m going to keep this, for now. We’ll talk about privileges later.”

I should keep my mouth shut but I can’t. “You saw there’s no dirty pictures and I’m still punished?” Dad doesn’t respond. I push my chair back. “Can I be excused? I need to study for finals.”

On television, teens cry and stomp into their rooms. But this is my life. Tears cause Dad to ask if I need a reason to cry. When I was young that meant getting spanked. Now, Dad thinks of a worse punishment—yard work on a hot day is his favorite. I try not to react at all. No tears, no stomping, and no begging means it doesn’t matter to me. This is survival.

“Yes,” Dad says. “You’ll be busy with the end-of-year tests. You don’t need a phone.”

As I stand up, Brendan mouths the question, “Slut?” I shake my head and escape before I start screaming.

Soon, I’ll have to ask Dad for money to buy bras. Completely embarrassing! It’s like having a loaded wallet

L.E.A.P

pointed at my head—don't move or I'll kill everything you want. I need to grow up and make my own money.

Journal Entry – Juvenescence at 13

MY TRUTH

Mom doesn't like me. That's not news—I've known this for years. Aren't moms supposed to love you no matter what? What's wrong with me? NO! What's wrong with her?

Dad has my phone. We talked privileges... I'm lucky... Most kids... Their money... Blah, blah, blah. Don't call your mother crazy...

Still, my phone is in his pocket. I don't know when I'll get it back. I need out! Where can a thirteen-and-a-half-year-old swim girl go? Can I swim to Hawaii? Might be worth the effort.

GROWING UP

I don't want to be called names again especially not by my mother. So, I searched for the magazines I got when Grandma Rose bought me a subscription. They're hidden under my bed, covered in dust. Valley Girl Magazine had articles about growing up. They aren't quizzes. I hate quizzes about what character you'd be in some movie or quizzes that tell you if you're a good girlfriend. Who cares? Movies aren't real and I'm not dating so—no. My parents don't believe I wasn't sexting and don't believe I'm

not a slut. I do tell lies, but doesn't everyone? Even if I can't tell the whole truth, shouldn't parents still be helpful? Especially about growing up?

Thank you, VG for the (extremely long) articles. I looked at these a year ago but it didn't mean anything. I'll re-read them all (eventually). I did start summarizing the first one. And, I've been planning. Who needs a mother anyway?

Linn's ~~Grownup~~ Emerging Adult List Plan (LEAP)

1. Growth spurt—

3 inches in one to two years ✓

2. Body development (wish I had less) ✓✓

3. Start period—Nope!

Wow! I'm nearly done and I wasn't even trying. Wish I could go back in time and be a child forever. This part of being a girl sucks! I hope I never have a period, period. Why don't boys have periods?

Read most of the next article—Personal and Emotional Development. Hoping to find out why I have to grow up. No answers but I found something I want to try.

4. BE SELF-SUFFICIENT

L.E.A.P

I'm sure this means getting a driver's license. If I drive, I could get a job, and get out of the house. Something that pays more than babysitting. Be independent! Note to self—check the internet to see how old you have to be to start driving. In the meantime, I'll start a 'my growing up' plan. My 'I don't need a mother' plan.

Start with LEAP 4, Becoming self-sufficient.

Linn

Walker

Gurke

Chapter 2

Well-Rounded Loser

I'VE BEEN PRETEND-STUDYING for a week now. It's like writing notes in class. My science book is on my desk turned to an important page. I have a pad and pencil, with some real notes, sitting next to me. At school, I have to make eye contact with the teacher occasionally and look thoughtful. At home, I need to seem focused on "studying." Today, I have one of the Valley Girl articles nearby. When I hear footsteps, I slide the textbook over the words I'm reading and pull my eyebrows together. I'm going for the science-is-so-difficult face.

"Stop sexting." Brendan walks into my room.

My head snaps up from my not-studying text. "You stop! I wasn't sexting, and you know it." Even I'm surprised by how angry I sound. "What do you want, Brendan?"

Brendan stops inside the room and tilts his head. He concentrates on the music coming from the CD playing on my old boom box. "Why are you listening to an angry girl band?"

"I like their songs."

"I don't see you as the angry type."

I glare at Brendan. "You'll change your mind when I beat the crap out of you."

"I'm too fast. You'll never catch me."

I let out a sigh. "Why are you here, Brendan?"

"You've got mail." He waves an envelope around. "This was sitting on the front porch." He steps up next to my

desk holding the package far enough away that I have to reach to grab it.

"It's from MeMe and PaPa Gurke in Oregon," I announce.

"I know, I can read." He continues to stand next to me.

I recognize Brendan's curiosity and decide to push my advantage. "Thanks," I say and put the envelope on my desk unopened.

"Open it, Spaz. I want to see what our grandparents sent you and not me."

I grab a pencil from my desk and work it under the flap.

"Could you go any slower?" Brendan complains.

"Yep." I pull up and the seal rips open. I dump a thin box onto the desk and give the envelope another tap—empty.

"Oh, lookie." Brendan laughs. "You got a box—you're special."

I wave it around. "They did send me a gift."

"Yeah, MeMe has sent me two of those. It's a pen made at PaPa's factory."

I open the box to see if he's right. "The pen's made of Myrtlewood." I'm good at facts.

"Yeah, yeah, what does the post-it say?"

I glance at the note. "Happy eighth-grade graduation."

"They won't be coming."

I frown at Brendan. "Who? Coming where?"

"MeMe and PaPa," he responds. "Don't get excited. They won't be at your graduation."

"I wasn't excited. MeMe always kisses me. She uses too much perfume and has lady whiskers. It creeps me out."

Brendan shakes his head. "You've got to grow a brain."

"What does that mean?"

"How long has she planted wet ones on you?" Brendan tilts his head. "Long enough for you to learn—stay out of her reach. You never see her grabbing me. Do you?"

Jerking Brendan's vanity chain is too easy. "No, because she likes me more."

"Duh, the rela-freaks prefer you. People hang with their own kind."

"Rela-freaks?"

"Relatives from the shallow end of the gene pool. Geeks, mutants, and weirdos like you."

"Not like you?"

"Nope. I'm way too awesome for Dad's family... and don't get me started on Mom's inbreeds. The hospital switched me at birth. My real parents were intelligent, beautiful—"

Can you hurt yourself by rolling your eyes too much?

I cut off Brendan's fantasy. "What does it take to get your driver's license?"

Brendan shakes his head. "You can't drive. You're not old enough."

"I'll be fourteen in September. I want to be self-sufficient, which means driving."

Brendan laughs. "Self-sufficient... that's rich. All I do is run errands and drive your sorry ass around."

"Seriously, how do I get my license?"

"Get older, take a class, do a butt-load of practice hours, and pass a test. It sounds easy, but it's a lot more complicated. Remind me to introduce you to the internet."

"I've already downloaded an instruction booklet. I know I'm too young to drive, but there's lots more to do before you actually drive. I was talking about getting Mom and Dad to let me get a license."

Brendan belly laughs until he's near tears. He fans himself. "I can't wait. Let me know when you plan to tell them. I want to watch."

"You did it," I grumble. "It's only fair for me to get a license too."

"Keep dreaming, smart one." Brendan taps my head

with his knuckles. "Before you can drive, you have to pass those tests you're—" Brendan flips my science book closed "—not studying for." He snorts. "I know all the tricks, Dipwad. I created the not-really-studying one."

"Of course you did," I respond with another eye roll.

"Enjoy your... pen." Brendan turns and walks out.

I wait until I hear his footsteps fade away to inspect my gift and talk to it like a new friend. "I'll name you Myrtle 'cause you're made of Myrtlewood. Probably bought at cost... I'm so special."

Most pens are a problem for leftys. Teachers say we don't hold them correctly, well I say it's correct. Still the ink gets smeared when I write. This one must have quick drying ink 'cause it doesn't smear. That's good news! Myrtle has a lighthouse etched on it. In all our visits to Coos Bay, I've never visited any lighthouse. That's not good or bad news, just a fact.

* * *

Staring at my mirror, I visualize myself as the sheriff in an old western movie. I shine my make-believe badge. "I ain't talking 'bout money. This here's 'bout growing up." Sheriff Linn tips her imaginary hat and struts out of my room.

By the time I reach the family room, most of my bravado's gone. "Dad?" I wait until he looks up from the book he's reading. "I need to sign up for driver's ed this summer. They only take credit cards. Can I use yours?"

"No, Linn, you *want* to take driver's education. You don't *need* it. You only need air, water, food, clothing, and shelter. Your mother and I pay for your basic needs. But you need to work for what you want. There is some question about shelter and clothing. Are those last two needed or are they a privilege?" Dad waits.

Arggg, were gunslingers this concerned with preci-

sion in their speech? How to answer his question without screaming? “I think shelter and clothing are needs,” I say as calmly as I can.

“Yes, but only the basics. We don’t have to provide a nice house or buy you new clothes. Anything that keeps you dry and warm is enough.”

“But... about the license, I don’t *need* driver’s ed. I appreciate the advantages you and Mom provide our family. Still, I’d like to add a license to my list of privileges. To take one of those classes I’m required to sign up online and pay with a credit card. May I use yours?” I slowly take a deep breath to recover without Dad seeing my frustration. *Speaking logically is exhausting!*

“You have to be fourteen to take driver’s education.” Dad attempts to read his book.

“I’ll be fourteen in September,” I announce.

Dad furrows his brow. “You can’t be. You’re still finishing eighth grade.”

“I turned thirteen last September, Dad.”

“And you’ll turn fourteen this year?”

I try not to tell him that’s how time works, but I can’t stop my eyes from rolling. “Yes, in a few months. Can I please use your credit card?”

“No,” Dad declares quickly.

Is he listening at all? I ball my fists and tell myself that hitting my father would be a bad idea. Slowly I make my hands relax. “Why not?”

Dad raises one finger. “You’re still too young. You can’t even get the permit until you’re at least fifteen and a half. Come back next summer when you’re almost fifteen and we’ll discuss how much the class you *want* costs.”

I turn and walk back toward my room, completely broken. Dad’s loaded wallet took me down without leaving his pocket. If I were a gunslinger or sheriff, the undertaker would be measuring me for a pine box.

And still no phone. I'm really beginning to hate that computer in the living room.

* * *

I hear footsteps coming toward my room. I arrange my face into what I hope is a normal, not-upset-about-the-driving-class expression.

"Linn..." Dad stops at my door and stares. "You okay?" *I guess I don't look normal.* Dad shrugs and places a box with a large trash bag on the floor. "We're having a garage sale Saturday. Please go through your room and fill this box with things you want to sell."

"Why are we doing a garage sale?" I sit up and lean forward. "We're not moving again, are we? I mean, I haven't even started high school yet. There are so many things I plan—"

"Stop." Dad puts his hands up. "Why do you and your brother jump to negative conclusions about everything? We want to clean up and make room for... next year."

"Why do we need to make room?" My voice sounds childish.

Dad pinches his nose. "Can you do this? Fill the box? If you help with the sale on Saturday, you can keep the money your items bring in."

The thought of cash makes the garage sale sound reasonable. "How much can I charge?"

"Fill the box." Dad turns and walks away mumbling about his greedy kids.

I sit on the floor in front of my closet. The collection of Barbies and one Ken doll is the first things I see. *I haven't played with these for at least a year.* I place all but my two favorites in the box. I can't get rid of swim Barbie or teacher Barbie.

An hour later my box is full. Besides the dolls, I've added a random troll, a few electronic games, and a lot of

stuffed animals. Also the bag of marbles that I found buried in the back of my closet. I'm not going to bother with the ones still in the heating vent. I'm keeping the collection of Beanie Babies, mature or not.

I start to reorganize my closet. In the back corner is a pile of shoe boxes. I pull them forward and begin putting the empties in the trash bag. "If I find ten empty boxes, I'm officially a hoarder," I announce to my room. "Am I obsessive if I open each one hoping to find something?" I look up into my mirror but there's no response. I take the lid off box number eight and freeze. The memory hits me hard. I close my eyes and hold my breath. *I wore a brace with this shoe when I was four. When did it start? And how have I forgotten it already?*

I can still feel the heavy plastic around my right knee and down my leg. I've never forgotten how it weighed me down and ruined only one shoe. *Did I stop remembering because it makes me sad?* I pick up the shoe. "Why are you here?" Shoving the shoe and box back into the corner of my closet, I go to find Dad in the garage.

"Dad, I remember I wore a leg brace when I was young. I don't need it anymore, right?"

"Obviously. You haven't worn that brace for years now. Why are you asking?"

"I found my worn shoe. Why haven't we talked about my brace ever?"

"We didn't need to talk about it. You're fine now. You were born with a twisted right knee. When you started to walk, you stepped with your left foot and then placed your right foot on the left and fell down. Your right knee is still twisted. You walk normally because the brace shifted your lower leg. Now you don't step on your own foot." Dad chuckles, "You bruised your forehead so often, we told people you were sprouting horns."

"Great," I respond. "I probably have brain damage."

"It could've happened," he jokes. "When we were too broke to afford a movie, we would take your brace off and watch you attempt to walk. It was hilarious."

"Making fun of a disabled child." I cross my arms and sit in a folding chair.

"I'm joking, Linn. Calm down. Your knee wasn't a disability. It was an obstacle, a challenge, a problem to solve. It taught you to get back up and try again. Your stubborn streak is forty to sixty percent genetic; I blame your mother." Dad smiles. "Wearing the brace made you try harder to walk. I'm proud of you for not giving up."

Compliments make my eyes sting. *Is this the same guy who took my phone for not sexting?* I don't understand. *Do you care about me, Dad?* I keep my focus on the table in front of me. "Why do you always side with Mom?"

There's a long pause before he speaks. "I don't take sides, Linn. I love all my family, equally." His voice is low, and his words are measured.

"I wasn't sexting and I'm not a slut. And I should get my phone back."

"Of course. You're a good kid."

"Then why didn't you tell Mom she was wrong?"

"You have to understand how much your mother suffers. Your Grandfather Jed was a cruel man. He taught your mother she'd become an evil temptress as she grew up. Bella's trying to move beyond his teachings, but it's difficult. There's no point arguing with her. I try to show her alternative views so she can live a happy life. You should do the same."

"What about the alcohol?"

"She doesn't drink that much." Dad's voice is tight. "It might hit her a little harder because she's so thin now. Let's not mention this again. Your mother idolized her father and won't listen to any criticism of him."

I sit and fume when Dad walks back into the house.

Keep your mouth shut, Linn. Forget the truth, Linn. Pretend everything's fine, Linn. Lie, Linn!

* * *

"Mirror, mirror on my door, oh what am I here for?" I cringe at my joke. "What? No response?" *It's suburbia, there's no royalty, no magic, no nothing, and definitely no talking mirrors. Even if the mirror spoke, it would tell me Brendan's better looking.*

Today's only the third time this year I've seen my reflection. Correction, I don't think I've stood here more than four times in my life. Dad's right. My left knee points straight ahead. The other is... I'm not sure what you call that direction. Off? Twisted? Is this why Mom doesn't like me? *I don't care what she thinks, I'm fine. Maybe.*

"Geez, Linn, you'll break the mirror. You don't need bad luck."

"Brendan, get out of my room."

"An open door's an invitation, Idjit. Dad said to get you for dinner."

"If only I could be an only child," I reply.

Brendan laughs. "You'd be bored without me."

I follow Brendan out and sit in my regular chair at the dinner table. *I don't want to admit it, but he's right.*

"What did you learn today, Linn?"

Mom's channeling her good mother personality and I make the mistake of being honest.

"Dad explained why I wore a brace when I was little. He said it made me stronger."

Mom drops her fork onto her plate. "There's nothing wrong with either of my children." She gives Dad a tight-lipped smile. "Your father doesn't remember much. It was a little issue, we helped you and everything's perfect now." Mom's upper lip begins to curl as she attempts to hide the lie and put a smile on her face.

“Everything’s perfect?” Dad repeats. “Do you hear yourself? You sound like your sister.”

Mom pops up, knocks her chair over, and points at me. The good mother personality is gone. “You’ve ruined another meal. I hope you’re happy.” She grabs her tumbler and charges toward the back of the house.

“It’s my fault.” Dad apologizes and stands. “I’ll see if I can fix this.”

Once Dad leaves, I turn to Brendan. “I ruined dinner? What did I do wrong?”

“You want to drive, and you don’t know anything.” Brendan continues eating. “You cut into Mom’s blind spot, her perfection lane.” Brendan shakes his head. “When are you going to learn? Driving’s like life—watch the others around you and expect crazy. Signal to enter another person’s lane. Be ready to stay put if they seem unstable. It’s the only way to survive.”

I sit at the table, speechless. The mirror doesn’t lie. I’m a twisted-knee girl. *I need—not want—to be self-sufficient so I can get out of this house.* Changing my name to ‘Fault-line Linn.’ When Fault-line Linn enters a room, the earth begins to shake.

Brendan gestures at me. “Pass the ketchup, Spaz. This meatloaf needs help.”

* * *

Journal Entry – Middle School’s Over

I cleaned the toys out of my closet to make room for adulthood. See how mature I am? Nadine and I made a plan to just have her show up on Sunday to take me bra shopping. I didn’t bother to tell my parents. I mean, they don’t tell me everything, either. Mom and Dad couldn’t say no when Mrs. Thomas and Nadine

showed up at our door. Then I asked Dad for money. That was fun—not! But I didn't want to spend what little I'd made at the garage sale. We then hit the sales. Mostly I stuck with white bras, but Nadine talked me into the purple sports bra. (Okay, it didn't take much talking. I really like that purple bra.)

I didn't talk about the shopping trip with anyone else. Mom doesn't care and Dad doesn't want to talk about girl stuff. I think he wishes I was a boy.

Middle school is over and I'm going to be in high school soon. But I'm not old enough to get my driving license. I Googled it and started a to-do list. Show identification, prove address, pay a fee, pass written and eye tests, take a class, blah, blah, blah. It was page twelve before the age thing came up. Fourteen isn't old enough for the permit or the class. The website makes me feel like growing up is wrong or at the very least too expensive. I'll be a high school loser.

LEAP

I was working on LEAP 4, Being self-sufficient. When I asked Brendan about my driver's license, he laughed. Brendan doesn't take me seriously, but that's not new. Can I be self-sufficient without driving? I made money at the garage sale—almost ten dollars. It's a start to becoming self-sufficient—whatever that means.

L.E.A.P

I read more of the Valley Girl article about Personal and Emotional Development. Using my new pen, I added another task to my list.

5. DATING AND PREFERENCE

I know my preference but I'm not dating. Why do people think preference is a choice? I didn't make a choice. With Golden Boy hanging around our house, I'm interested. Just not interested in Steve! Not sure when this happens to others. I don't remember waking up one day and thinking... boys or girls? Some people get confused by what they see and hear from their parents but, not me. I shouldn't complain, but the article didn't talk about sex. I don't know who wrote the article, but sex must be part of dating and preference. I need to know how long you should date before having sex and how it happens (I don't know who I can ask).

Even with my LEAP List, I'm confused about what it means to grow up. It can't be as simple as selling your toys out of the garage. Or even being able to drive.

This would be easier if I could trust my parents. Aren't they supposed to be helping?

Linn

Walker

Gurke